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Cult Buddhism

The blurring and abuse of Buddhism
by Piya Tan ©2010

1 What is a cult?

1.1 DEFINITIONS

1.1.0 Life as a stage. As long as we are unawakened, we hold views. We tend to *view* or look at Buddhism in a certain manner. However, for most of us, our looks are merely glances while our heads are bent on our daily workaday lives. We feel quite contented to know *about* Buddhism, perhaps even to *feel*,¹ if we are patient enough, the peace or clarity of some aspects of Buddhism that seems to fit or fill our lives. However, should we venture nearer the Dharma light, we are likely to see better and more of what the Buddha's teachings can offer to enrich our lives, even to forever re-course ourselves with a higher purpose.

For some of us, however, the bright lights of reality at such close range could be so glaring and colourful that they have a powerful psychedelic effect on us. We tend to project everything we have loved or sought onto those stage lights. On this great stage before us, we might meet many fine actors, producers and directors, all very self-confident, intelligent, entertaining and attractive in their roles. We are ourselves given roles, and we play our parts. The sounds and sights, the props and space, the backdrops and curtains, and of course the audience, make everything so right and so worthwhile.

Then, one day, we realize that the show is really so repetitive and predictable that we are like little cartoon figures imprinted in a strip of celluloid played at the whims of the cameraman or anyone who knew which buttons to press. Moreover, the movie, we soon discover, is not even about us at all. The lights suddenly fail and we are left in total darkness. The familiar kind voices are silent, and the stage and the hall are desolately empty. We have been staged.

The only way out is to find the door and at once leave for the true light of day. Only then do we realize we are real people in a real world. We then begin to actually live in the fresh joyful spaciousness of true reality.

1.1.1 Definitions of cult

1.1.1.1 PRIMARY DEFINITION. Primarily, a **cult** is a group or organization that systematically uses various methods of social and mental control to hold its followers' undivided loyalty to a single individual, usually a living person. Such methods include *brainwashing* or *mind control processes* to manipulate the way members think and behave so as to subvert their free will and restrict their independence. The purpose here usually is to undermine the members' independence and self-reliance, so that they come to fully trust the insights and decisions of the cult leader or the group leadership.

A cult usually has a parent-image or guru-figure as its supreme leader. Cult followers see such a leader as being *charismatic*, that is, they attribute special abilities, gifts, powers, such as sainthood or divinity, to him (or her). Usually, such a leader might already have some kind of personal qualities, such as good looks, social status, academic qualification, political power, religious attainment or simply a charmingly engaging personality. He might enhance his own appeal by dressing well, excelling in public speaking and writing, assuming an impressive sounding name, and have some flair for the dramatic or eccentric.²

1.1.1.2 SECONDARY DEFINITION. A cult may also centre around a religious or mythical figure, or someone perceived as a genius of sorts (who is non-existent or dead), say Guanyin or Buckminster Fuller. Such cult activities may be as innocuous as discussing the cult-figure's life and works, or may be deeply devotional as to chants mantras or prayers related to the revered figure.

Such a secondary cult may also form around a sacred text deemed as having an apotropaic (magical) or a salvific (saving) power of its own, as it were, such as the Lotus Sutra [1.2.3.1] or the Saṅghāṭa Sūtra

¹ See **How the saints feel**, SD 55.6.

² For a monograph, see Piyasilo, *Charisma in Buddhism*, Petaling Jaya (Malaysia), 1992h. For a most entertaining, yet instructive, literary expression of this, see the French playwright Molière's comedy, *Tartuffe* (1664): <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/28488>. For more info, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tartuffe>.

[1.2.3.2]. Such sacred texts may be recited, usually in part (especially those regarded as being especially liberating or efficacious), or in full on special occasions. Usually, even the title of the text may be regarded as efficacious enough to invoke some kind of miraculous intervention.

In a secondary cult, there is usually a “voice” of the cult-figure or cult-object, who defines its nature and power. Such leaders may claim to be able to communicate directly with the cult figure, an activity which greatly empowers the “voice,” the secondary cult figure. Sometimes, this secondary cult figure might claim or be perceived to assume the personality of the primary cult figure, such as in a trance.

1.1.2 Brainwashing. The term “brainwashing” was first used in 1953 to describe techniques used by the Chinese Communists to subvert the loyalty of American prisoners captured in Korea. Brainwashing in this original sense involved physical coercion: imprisonment, food and sleep deprivation, and sometimes torture. In this sense, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines “brainwashing” as

The systematic and often forcible elimination from a person’s mind of all established ideas,³ especially political ones, so that another set of ideas may take their place; this process regarded as the kind of coercive conversion practised by certain totalitarian states on political dissidents.

The term is used more broadly today, and can refer to any kind of effort or process of removing old ideas, especially religious ones, to be replaced by new ideas, approved of by the institution, group, cult or individual. Such a process is very common in God-centred religions, but may also be found in person-centred forms of Buddhism, especially where devotion is unquestioningly given to a guru-figure. However, in this latter case, the term “mind-control” might be a more appropriate.

1.1.3 Mind control. The term “mind control” seems to suggest that a person’s mind can be remotely or robotically controlled by some outside agency, as sometimes depicted in science fiction. Mind control is very much more subtle in the case of a cult. While brainwashing might be taken to be a more *active* effort at controlling others, mind control is often more *indirect* and *subtle*, usually complementing the brainwashing process.

As such, mind control is more of an *environment* rather than a technique. Such processes are so subtle that they are imperceptible, unless we know what we are looking for. While brainwashing often uses logical arguments, repetition of ideas, even threats of various kinds (including notions of hell, holocaust, world-destruction, or the subjects’ death), mind control works more like memes.

Buddhist mind control has been regularly observed, even documented, by informed practitioners and academic specialists, especially amongst Zen Buddhism and Vajrayana Buddhism in the US.⁴ Analyses and critical studies of the American Zen situation, especially that of the San Francisco Zen Center,⁵ has been well documented and worth some careful study to prevent willful blindness⁶ on our own part, especially if we are involved with some Buddhist activity.⁷

³ When I was with the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order in the 1980s, I was told by the study group leader, an Order Member, to “forget all that you have learned, especially the Theravāda teachings,” so that I could fit into the group. He was uncomfortable with my using and presenting basic Buddhist teachings which many in the group liked but which he was not himself aware of.

⁴ On the Chogyam Trungpa scandal, see **Bad friendship**, SD 64.17 (4+5).

⁵ See **Bad friendship**, SD 64.17 (6).

⁶ “Willful blindness,” also called ignorance of law, willful ignorance, contrived ignorance or Nelsonian knowledge, is a legal term referring to when an individual seeks to avoid civil or criminal liability for a wrongful act by intentionally putting himself in a position where he will be unaware of facts which would render him liable. For example, persons carrying packages containing illegal drugs have claimed that they never asked or were never told about the contents and so have no intention of breaking the law: see Luban, *Contrived Ignorance*, 1999 vol 87 Georgetown Law Journal, 957; general reading: M Heffernan 2011. Or, in a Buddhist situation, we blindly accept that a certain teacher is “highly attained,” even “enlightened,” and accepts everything he does, even when he breaks the precepts: see **Beyond good and evil**, SD 18.7 esp (8).

⁷ An excellent summary is Stuart Lachs’ “Richard Baker and the myth of the Zen roshi” (2002), which also gives a helpful list of related sources worth further study.

1.1.4 Memes. **Memes** are the tools of mind-control, spreading by replicating themselves. Broadly defined, memes are *the building-blocks or basis for our constructing ideas, feelings and emotions that are then translated into speech and action*. In other words, *meme* can almost always be replaced by such words as “view,” “idea,” or “notion.” Memes are commonly regarded in a derogatory sense as being a kind of infectious agent of the mind (a mental virus), that is, those who believe in a meme are likely to be unaware of its workings. It is like “catching” a cold, and going on to infect others with it.

The concept of meme, however, is helpful in our understanding as to how information is propagated within a culture, or a global network. Scientists, like Richard Dawkins, have noticed that the way that ideas and constructs spread amongst individuals and groups follow the laws of selective adaptation that govern the evolution of species.

An idea, for example, is widely propagated, not because it is good, but simply because it is a *successful reproducer*. A very good example the way religious objects (relics), figures (holy statues) and buildings (temples and churches) are constructed; and ways of praying, using melodic and repetitive chants or rhythmic and loud music. Such memes project an air of awe, religiosity, and often, fear, too.

Such memes project a “bigger-than-self” perception of a belief or idea. For example, Buddha relics might be perceived as bringing us into the presence of the living Buddha himself. The cavernous domes of a church might invoke a feeling of the immanence of an almighty God. Some chants or prayers induce a trance-like experience that “prove” that the subject has been touched or chosen by divine grace.

Another common example of a meme is the conversion and indoctrination methods of an evangelical religion that discourages critical thinking and encourages aggressive proselytization. Such a religious system is a virulent memplex (a complex of memes), that encourages *self-replication*. In short, memes function to make exact copies of themselves.⁸ Memes are mental viruses and replicators.

1.2 WHEN A CULT IS UNWHOLESOME. A cult, as defined and described above, however, is not necessarily harmful in itself. Most, if not all, religious groups operate in this way. So when is a cult unwholesome, even evil? If we are to look from the viewpoint of moral ethics, I think, the best answer would be that *a cult is negative when it is rooted in greed, hate, delusion, and fear*.⁹

Here, we shall examine some examples of such cults. However, these unwholesome roots are trends within a cult rather than being the cult itself. In other words, we will look at the kind of pervading negative emotion that a cult can induce in us, if we are to be caught up with it. Our bodies, speech and minds *contribute, even create*, the cult. As such, it is within our power to weaken, even break up, such a cult. The idea is not to let our lives be led and pushed on by the biases of greed, hate, delusion and fear. Instead, we should live, inspired by charity, lovingkindness, wisdom, and courage.

1.2.1 Greed-based cult

1.2.1.1 THE DHAMMAKAYA TEMPLE. A greed-based cult tends to be *materialistic, pleasure-loving, and acquisitive*. A group could start off inspired by a noble vision of serving and helping others, but as it get bigger and gains momentum, it might get caught up with self-expansion at any cost, or in a way that affects others negatively. **The Dhammakaya Temple** of Thailand, for example, is wildly successful because it provides a blend of consumerist form of populist Buddhism.

The *Bangkok Post* (21 Dec 1998) reports that Dhammakaya’s 30,000-million-baht religious monument looks like a spaceship. Its leader’s urgent appeal for donations to complete the monument in order to “save the world” sounds like a doomsday cult’s message. Scholars have attacked its teachings as a distortion and commercialization of Buddhism. Nevertheless, the Dhammakaya movement has been hugely successful and well-supported even by educated professionals and the social elite.

Part of their appeal lies in their well-managed image and public perception. The Phra Dhammakaya Temple is set in serene, spacious and shady grounds. At the centre is a simple, elegant white *ubosot* (convocation hall) set amid lush gardens, snaking streams, and refreshing fountains. The peace it exudes contrasts starkly against many of Bangkok’s temples, often crowded and noisy with religious businesses and structures.

⁸ For a study, see **Memes**, SD 26.3.

⁹ These are called the 4 biases (*āgati*), see D 3:133, 182, 228; A 2:18, 4:236 f.

The great and growing wealth of the movement has also brought about splits and factions in its leadership. The core movement is a pyramidal hierarchy, with the highest authority at its peak, surrounded by its inner circle of monks. They generally wear imported robes which are more costly and shiny than the robes of the ordinary monks. At the base is an army of full-time and well-trained staff and volunteers.

The Dhammakaya movement uses active “direct-sales” corps to market *merit* as a commodity which the faithful could “buy.” Customers are given easy access to the “products” with free transport for their shopping trips, served by a troop of well-groomed, smiling receptionists. In the “Millionaire Forever” merit-making project, donors are promised wealth in every lifetime if they make a present-life gift of 1,000 baht monthly to the temple’s food fund.¹⁰

Seth Mydans (1999), writing on the Dhammakaya, describes an extremely materialist Buddhism: “Over the last two decades, many here say, it has become a national pursuit, as much a part of today’s Thai culture as its Buddhist traditions.” Mydans, quoting a Thai professor of philosophy, says that it is trying to transform Buddhism to make it comfortable with both capitalism and consumer culture ... One teaching is, you make money Monday to Friday, then on Saturday and Sunday you come to the temple and meditate and your mind will be more supple and clear so that on Monday you can make more money.¹¹ This is known in psychology as a case of the defence mechanism of “isolation.”¹²

1.2.1.2 SEX-BASED CULTS. As a rule, religious cults involves sexual abuse and violence (rape, etc), where those in position of authority of trust mislead, seduce or coerce other into some kind of sexual relationship. This is a very widespread and problematic area which has been researched separately.¹³

1.2.2 Hate-based cult. Hate-based cultic Buddhism is likely to be *nihilistic* (not believing in karma or not bothered about it), generally *intolerant* of other systems, and tends to be *exclusivist*. A British Buddhist group, **the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order** (FWBO), centred around the Western Buddhist Order (WBO), both started by the cult guru Sangharakshita,¹⁴ during its early (pre-1990s) days, was especially anti-family, anti-women, and anti-Theravada.

What is interesting about a hate-based cult is that it tends to have *lust* on the other side of its coin. Sangharakshita had turned to traditional Buddhism, especially Theravada, probably because he hoped that as a bhikshu, he could resolve his homosexual inclinations.¹⁵ Like many other Western Buddhists of his time, he also tried out other Buddhist traditions, especially the Vajrayana, and also experimented with drugs.¹⁶

As British Chan teacher, **John Crook**, observes, “It is acknowledged that he [Sangharakshita] experimented with sexuality in ways unacceptable from a professed monk but characteristic of the ‘permissiveness’ of the time. What does remain strange is that he continued to wear robes, hold a title and appear frequently in the guise of a monk even though his behaviour was typical of a young Western lay person of the period.” (1998:2). Understandably, his conduct brought on disastrous public scandals.

A disenchanted ex-order member of the WBO even maintains a website (the ex-FWBO Files)¹⁷ to keep the public informed of not only of Sangharakshita and his group, but also of the danger of guru-devotion and cults in general. The key charges that the ex-Files make of the FWBO are:

- (1) that Sangharakshita lacked proper monastic and Dharma training in India where his sexual activities first came to light;

¹⁰ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dhammakaya_Movement; <http://www.rickcross.com/reference/general/general644.html>.

¹¹ Quoted from P Thomas 2009:66.

¹² See **Samaṇa Gadrabha S** (A 3.81/1:229), SD 24.10 (2); **Khaluṅka S** (A 8.14,13/4:193), SD 7.9.

¹³ See **Bad friendship**, SD 64.17.

¹⁴ Otherwise known as David P Lingwood (1925-).

¹⁵ This is of course a speculation, but one based on an observable pattern when we have known such people well enough: see eg the tragic case of the monk Ñāṇavīra (1920-1965): **Chann’ovāda S** (M 144), SD 11.12 (6.2).

¹⁶ On the question of Sangharakshita’s monkhood, see **How Buddhism became Chinese**, SD 40b (4.3.3.10) & **Was the Buddha a monk?**, SD 63.5. Late in his life, Sangharakshita attached the title “Urgyen” (claiming a direct connection with Padmasambhava) before his religious name: see (1.1) on how this enhances a person’s charisma.

¹⁷ <http://www.fwbo-files.com/FWBOFiles/fwbofiles.htm>, esp http://www.fwbo-files.com/guardian_article_v2.htm.

- (2) that Sangharakshita worked out his own version of Buddhism serving as the FWBO & WBO ideology;
- (3) that sexual openness of the group led to abuse of power (such as sexual exploitation of boys and young men) and personal distress of heterosexual young men coerced into homosexuality;
- (4) that the group was predominantly anti-family and anti-marriage;
- (5) that the FWBO's success was built on unethical and exploitative accumulation of funds.

The FWBO was badly affected by the scandal, and many order members (full-time ordained Western Buddhist Order or WBO members) left. However, by the 1990s, the group was strong enough to survive the scandal.

In 1968, the FWBO started with only 12 members, had very little money and no permanent centre. In 1996, Windhorse Trading alone claimed an annual turnover of £4,500,000. In 1997, the Order's meditation classes were attended by an estimated 20,000 people per year in the UK alone, they ran over 70 centres on 4 continents, and had an estimated annual turnover of £5-10 million per year.

On the positive side, the FWBO struggled to correct itself. In 2010, they changed their name to Tri-ratna Buddhist Community. Even before that, most of the FWBO component communities and WBO order members saw themselves being independent of Sangharakshita. This is metamorphosis was not impossible, even healthy, as they worked to build themselves up again. Their renewal attempts were not so difficult because of their huge funds and the resilience of its more serious members. Another good sign is that the new WBO members are more open to traditional Buddhism, including the Theravada that they once loved to bash up.

1.2.3 Delusion-based cult

1.2.3.1 CONTEMPORARY NICHIRENISTS. A delusion-based cult is generally *obscurantist* (with unclear teachings, often a hodge-podge of ideas or texts), spurred on by some “*urgent*” agenda, usually the desire for immediate and ready-made happiness, wealth or power, or the fear of some *widespread catastrophe*, such as the world's ending. Such cults are often led by a doom prophet whose message is, as a rule, summary and ominous: “The world is going to end, join me or you will perish!” Every generation seems to have its own clutch of doom-sayers: so far none of them have been right, but they will be one day for sure, but no one will be around to slap their back.

One of the most famous of Buddhist doom prophets is the Japanese reformist monk, **Nichiren** (Rilián 日蓮, 1222-1282), whose personality and teachings led to the rise of Nichiren Buddhism in Japan.¹⁸ Nichiren used the Lotus Sutra as his thunderbolt, which he hurled at other Buddhists and his society. The mythical tone and prophetic visions of the Lotus Sutra could easily be interpreted by a passionate prophet to voice his own concerns against religious or social oppression, real or perceived.

The Lotus Sutra's millennial tone (speaking of the Dharma-ending age)¹⁹ boded well, as Japanese culture and history had shown, with the people of the Kamakura period (1185-1333), troubled by earthquakes, tsunamis, political unrest and impending invasions of Kublai Khan's Mongol navy. Nichiren fervently projected the eschatological (world-ending) ideas and visions of the Lotus Sutra into his own vision of an idealized Japanese society.

Today, lay Nichiren organizations—such as the Rissho Kosei Kai and the Soka Gakkai International—are very successful modern religions. However, the main reason for their success is less spiritual than it is socioeconomic and political.²⁰ A lesson here is that it is easier to start and run a religion when we

¹⁸ See Piyasilo, *Nichiren: The new Buddhism of modern Japan*, Malaysia, 1988d.

¹⁹ Eg B Kato et al, *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, Tokyo, 1975:226.

²⁰ Minoru Kiyota, in his paper on “Japan's New Religions (1945-65),” reports that, in a 1965 interview, his Soka Gakkai informants stated that “their own brand of religion is the only way to bring about the well-being of mankind and the prosperity of the state [Japan], and that to realize these goals, the conversion of all citizens is necessary. When questioned as to the possibility of converting all citizens to the Soka Gakkai faith, its leaders shrewdly remark that only one-third of the citizens need to be converted because amongst the remaining two-thirds, one-third would be half-way sympathizers and only the remaining one-third would be downright opponents to the Soka Gakkai faith and to the political aims of the Komeitō [the Soka Gakkai's political party].” (1981:206)

have *a vision* and *a lot of funds*. After all, religious truth is what the believers believe and what is widely broadcast. However, those who have tasted true inner peace, and perhaps the more insightful scholars of religions, too, would see that such religious phenomena are but colourful yet brief phases in the cycle of human social behaviour.

During the last decade of the 20th century, the Soka Gakkai president, Daisaku Ikeda, allowed a more open approach, getting his organization more involved in social projects and dialogues with other Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. This new development was regarded by the Nichirenist monastic order (Nichiren Shōshū) as a betrayal of Nichiren's original struggle and ideas.²¹ The situation reached a point when in 1992, the clerical Nichiren Shōshū excommunicated lay president Daisaku Ikeda, so that the Sōka Gakkai International (SGI) became an independent lay organization. One of the criticisms levelled against the SGI was that it was a cult centred around its president, overshadowing even Lotus Sutra itself.

In the early 2000, the Singapore Soka Association held dialogues with local mainstream Buddhists. On their invitation, I attended a few of them. Although their members (predominantly locals led by a Japanese priest) were friendly, they were still *unwilling to allow their members to be open to the ideas and activities of mainstream Buddhists*. The “dialogue” approach was apparently a skillful means to keep in touch with local developments, but not to be a part of them. Even then, this was a far cry from the days when they used aggressive conversion methods of “breaking and subduing” (*shakubuku* 折伏) whole families into joining them. Perhaps time will mellow them into being more open to others in a more unconditional manner.

1.2.3.2 THE SAṄGHĀṬA SŪTRA. As already mentioned [1.1.1.2], a cult may form around even an object, such as a sacred text, that is, as *a secondary cult*. Such an example is **the Saṅghāṭa Sūtra**, an apocryphal, even spurious, Mahāyāna text. More fully known as the Ārya Saṅghāṭa Sūtra (“the Noble Vessel Discourse”),²² it was first written in Sanskrit, and later translated into the major languages of Buddhist communities to the north, northwest and east of India, such as Khotanese, Sogdian, Chinese, and Tibetan. These translations occurred between the 5th and the 10th centuries. Manuscripts of the Saṅghāṭa Sūtra have been recovered in Gilgit (1931 and 1938), Khotan, Dunhuang, and other sites along the Silk Road in Central Asia.

Many scholars have shown an interest in the Saṅghāṭa Sūtra, but the interest is mostly philological (the nature and significance of its language). They have produced critical editions of the sutra and made significant contributions to its study. **Oskar von Hinüber**, however, has noted that the text is “confused” (1980), and **Giotto Canevascini** says that it is “cryptic” (1993). Such remarks are understandable as the text is not didactic (instructive) but apotropaic (magical), which also explains its widespread popularity.

The popularity of the apocryphal Saṅghāṭa Sūtra is mainly due to its promises of purportedly “immediate end” to our bad karma, especially the “5 heinous bads” or, in the Tibetan version, the “5 uninterrupted actions” (*pañcānantaryāṇi karmāṇi*):²³

The Buddha said: “Virtuous man, suppose someone has personally committed, or asked others to commit, or compliantly rejoiced in the five heinous sins, if he can hear even four gathas from this Dharma-Gate, join his palms, pay homage to it, and have pure faith in it, then his five heinous karma will be eliminated. How much more so, of those who fully write, read, recite, and make offerings to it, such merits and virtues are immeasurable.” (Saṅghāṭa Sūtra ch 2)

²¹ For SGI's statement, see <http://www.sokaspirit.org/about/faq/why-have-sgi-members-been-exchanging-their-gohonzon>. See also SHIMADA Hiromi, *Kōmeitō vs. Sōka Gakkai* (Jap). Asahi Shinsho, Tokyo, May 2007:114.

²² This is a free tr, foll internal usage of the Sutra. SED defines *saṅghāṭa* as “fitting and joining of timber, joinery, carpentry” and also “pot?” In a few Buddhist Skt texts, it means “vessel” or “jar,” and this image of containing is evoked several times in the sutra, where the Buddha there calls the Saṅghāṭa a “treasury of the Dharma.” There are at least two Chinese trs: *Sēngjiāzhā jīng* 僧伽吒經 (T13.423) by Upasūnya (Yuèpóshōunà 月婆首那) of Yuán Wèi (Northern Chao) & *Dàjīhuì zhèngfǎ jīng* 大集會正法經 (T13.424) by 施護 of Sòng.

²³ On the 5 heinous karma, see **Parikuppa S** (A 5.129/3:146a), SD 40b.2(2.8.2.3) [1.2.3.2].

The Sanskrit term *pañcānantarya, karma* in Pali is *pañca ānantariya* or *ānantarika kamma*,²⁴ translated as “immediacy-deeds, heinous crimes which bring immediate results.”²⁵ The locus classicus for this doctrine is in **the Parikuppa Sutta** (A 5.129) in the Aṅguttara Nikāya, where it is stated that one who kills his own mother, kills his own father, kills an arhat, with ill intention makes the Buddha bleed, or breaks up the Sangha, will be reborn in a suffering state.²⁶

To say that the effects of these five heinous deeds could be “eliminated” is as good as saying that it is all right to commit them. No such teaching is found anywhere in the early texts. In fact, this is a very serious wrong view, which has the same painful effect of bringing its perpetrator or believer to be reborn in a suffering state.²⁷

1.2.3.3 HOW THE SAṄGHĀṬA SŪTRA AROSE. How did such a text of insidious wrong views become so widespread in ancient times? The likely explanation for this is that it is *a cult of the book*, that is, the worship of books. Art historian **Deborah Klimburg-Salter** has written about the impact that the Saṅghāṭa Sūtra might have had on the culture around it. She points out that the decorative manuscript covers found with the Saṅghāṭa in Gilgit were among the very earliest, suggesting that the text itself played a pivotal role in shifting attitudes towards books in India itself:

The Gilgit manuscript covers, as well as manuscripts from the find, mark an important phase in the history of the art of the book in India.... That is, that a change took place in the concept of the book so that books were seen not merely as media for the conveyance of information but, for some reason or reasons as yet unclear, began to be conceived of as objects worthy of beautification. As we shall see, one possibility, which needs further consideration, is that this development was affected by the evolution of certain texts into cult objects. (Klimburg-Salter, 1987: 817)

Such passages as this, declaring that simply *reading* (or chanting) the sutra brings abundant merit, clearly shows the characteristics of *a book cult*:

The Blessed One said: “Listen, child of the lineage: If anyone who hears the Saṅghāṭa dharma-paryāya is able to have a lifespan of 84,000 aeons, what need is there to mention one who has the Saṅghāṭa sutra written out and who reads it? Sarva-shūra, that one will produce an extremely large mass of merit. (Saṅghāṭa Sūtra 2006:4)²⁸

One widespread effect of such a book-cult was that *the monastic sangha became marginalized* since the worship was centred around a physical object that was easily available at any time. Even where there was a monastic sangha, it would perhaps only attract worshippers who believe that such monastics could service them with something as “potent” as scripture-worship, if not more efficacious. Either way, we have here a new Buddhism, one that *had less or no emphasis on self-effort or mental training*. In other words, it is a spiritually weak and externalized Buddhism.

The consequences of a weak Buddhism are simply disastrous. It does not really help us. It obscures the good that we already are, even destroys it. We find ourselves dependent on cult leaders and external rituals. We simply lack healthy emotional independence. In the end, it sets us back worse than we were before. On a social level, it atomizes people into hollow self-seekers, so that there is practically neither fellowship nor sangha spirit. Today, Buddhism has all but disappeared from Central Asia.

²⁴ V 5:128; Dhs 225; Vbh 378; Vism 177.

²⁵ Payutto, “Dictionary of Numerical Dhammas” in 1975: 208.

²⁶ **Parikuppa S** (A 5.129/3:146), SD 40b.2(2.8.3.2); M 115,13/3:64 f @ SD 29.1a; V 2:193; MA 2:351; AA 2:7 = VbhA 427; UA 243; PmA 402 ad Pm 1:124; KvuA 141-143; PugA 185 ad Pug 13.

²⁷ See eg **Sañcetanika S** (A 10.206.4/5:293), SD 3.9. See also **Lohicca S**, where it is stated that “wrong view leads to one of two destinies: hell or an animal birth” (D 12.10/1:228), SD 34.8.

²⁸ Refs to the Tibetan version, Ārya Saṅghāṭasūtra Dharmaparyāya, © Damcho Diana Finnegan (Lhundup Damchö), 2006: http://www.sanghatasutra.net/english_translation_final_a4.pdf.

1.2.4 Fear-based cult. One negative emotion that is found in all religious teachings, whether folk cults or global faiths, is that of *fear* and *delusion*. Fear, says the Dhammapada, arises from craving (Dh 215 f), which in turn is fuelled by delusion, rooted in ignorance. We fear not getting what we desire, and having found it, we fear losing it; above all, we fear what we do not know. And of course we fear pain and death (Dh 129 f).²⁹

When fear becomes a regular feature of a religion, then it is clearly a cult. Such fear is used to hold the followers together and to control their minds and actions. Sometimes the use of fear can have such a profound and pervasive effect that it can be regarded as a political tool. A dramatic example of this is found in Japanese Buddhism.

Buddhism first arrived in Japan in the mid-6th century as a new faith of the royalty.³⁰ By the **Nara** period (710-794), Japanese Buddhism practically dominated every level of urban Japan. By the following Heian period (794-1185), with its capital at Kyoto, the Buddhist monasteries were so wealthy and powerful that the major temples recruited their own **warrior priests** (*sōhei* 僧兵).³¹

The professional soldier-priests protected their masters in the bitter doctrinal and political disputes within and amongst the temples, and in conflicts over *shoen* (landed estate) holdings. So effective were these militant priests that they only needed to quietly march into the capital, bearing the sacred palanquin of the protective Shintō deity associated with their temple. With their presence made, the court would quickly relent to any demand of the priests.

The warrior-priests most feared by both royalty and commoners alike were those of the Enryaku-ji, the Tendai headquarters, on Mt Hiei.³² By the **Kamakura** period (1185-1392), the Tendai was the biggest and most powerful of the eight Japanese Buddhist schools existing then. All this would end in the Tokugawa period (1543-1868), when in 1571, the shogun Oda Nobunaga, distrustful of the immense wealth and power of the temples, first attacked and razed the Enryaku-ji, breaking up the *sōhei* there. Then he went on to suppress the other Buddhist temple establishments.

The **Tokugawa** administration was shrewd enough not to exterminate Buddhism. In fact, they used the nation-wide network of Buddhist temples as parishes or constituencies where locals had to register themselves (the alternative was to register with a local Shinto shrine) and be issued a sort of passport stating that they were not Christians. The Tokugawa rulers were perspicacious in reading the true purposes of the European colonizers, comprising feuding orders of Catholic priests and of Dutch Protestants trying to “trade” with Japan then. By the mid-17th century, Christianity was totally banned from Japan.³³

The deathblow to Japanese monasticism and Buddhism as a whole came in the **Meiji** period (1868-1912). In 1872, the Meiji government of Japan promulgated a law that simply stated: “From now on Buddhist clerics shall be free to eat meat, marry, grow their hair, and so on.”³⁴ Furthermore, there will be no penalty if they wear ordinary clothing when not engaged in religious activities.”³⁵ Known informally as **the nikujiki saitai** 肉食妻帯 (“meat-eating and marriage”) law, it was introduced, ironically, with the support of some leading Japanese Buddhists of the time to modernize Buddhism and to counter the rise of Christianity in Japan,³⁶ but instead it worked to significantly weaken monastic Buddhism as a political

²⁹ For a more positive significance of these verses, see **Veḷu,dvāreyya S** (S 55.7/5:352-356), SD 1.5.

³⁰ See Piya Tan, *History of Buddhism*, Singapore, 2004 ch 5 (Buddhism in Japan).

³¹ See Mikael S Adolphson, *The Teeth and Claws of the BuddhaL: Monastic warriors and sohei in Japanese history*, Honolulu: U of Hawaii Press, 2007.

³² See Stephen Turnbull, *Japanese Warrior Monks AD 949-1603*, Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2003; see also <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/S%C5%8Dhei>.

³³ Cf **Caṅkī S** (M 95), SD 21.15 (3.3(3)): Was early Buddhism a cult? & The Kakure Kirishitans of Japan.

³⁴ Robinson & Johnson 1982: 181.

³⁵ Date 1930: 621.

³⁶ On the complex issue of the *nikujiki saitai* law, see Jaffe 2001:92-241 & **Monastic, sex and marriage**, SD 38.9.

and social force in Japan.³⁷ This move effectively destroyed the Buddhist monastic system in Japan, which has since not been revived.³⁸

1.3 CULTISHNESS IS MORE COMMON THAN WE THINK

1.3.1 Cultishness hinders us. The problem with cults is not merely about other people. It is also about us, how we look at life. More specifically for us as Buddhists, it is about how we look to Buddhism to understand ourselves, or are we using it as a drug to feed our selfish wants or play out our unconscious fancies? There is a more serious problem: we are simply blind to errors while we are doing them. In time, looking back from a more mature stage in our lives, we realize how adolescent and foolish we had been.

In my career as a Buddhist teacher, I have repeatedly seen how young adults fervently believe or claim how completely true a certain Buddhist tradition (Abhidhamma, or Vipassana, or Vajrayana) is, or how perfect their guru is, or how well they know some Buddhist topic, or how right they are in doing some kind of “Buddhist work.” When I met them about a decade or two later, they would admit to me how mistaken they had been, and how their views had changed. Those who were able to see themselves in this manner, as a rule, had, to that extent, grown up or healed themselves. It is such joy to see them mature spiritually.

However, sadly, this is not always the case. There are those who, having passed the phases of “mastering” and “teaching” Abhidhamma or Vipassana, and then becoming bored or disillusioned with them, they turn to New Age beliefs or academic learning, watering down the Dharma, or twisting it to fit their needs, views and status. One fact that suggests such people are not fully mature is their *regressive reaction*, that they easily get upset and angry when someone disagrees with them or when things do not go their way.

The point is that today, any of us, once we are able to read, write and talk, might use the computer and Internet to “spread Buddhism,” or mass market Buddhism in some way. The tools of mass communicating Buddhism are so easily available and effective today, just as writing and printing were available to the ancient Buddhist audiences, that anyone with some evangelical zeal or emotional need could present “Buddhism” or a new Saṅghāṭa Sūtra [1.2.3.2] to others. But what kind of teaching is this? Where have we learned it from? Have we quoted the Buddha or the Suttas faithfully? Or, do we give more credence to a professional academic’s passing take on Buddhism? Aren’t we spreading wrong views? Aren’t we the cause of Buddhism’s demise?

Every Buddhist generation has its Nāgārjuna, its Asaṅga, its Candrakīrti, its Buddhaghosa, trying knowingly or unknowingly to edit or better the Buddha. Even these great masters erred in some ways.³⁹ Even I make mistakes, too, in my thinking, speaking and writing, and as such welcome to be corrected. So, we play our Buddhist word-games. Since these are games, let us at least play fairly with others, and keep to the basic ethical rules. For, it is the rules that define the game. Surely all this is fine, and we all will somehow have our audiences and positive strokes from our admirers. But we need to aim higher.

The world is spacious enough for wrong views, but our minds are capable of detecting and uprooting them, if we allow it. We must wean ourselves from the praises and applauses that we hunger after for a more healthy diet. Only in joyfully looking within ourselves will we discover how we have deluded ourselves, and those who believe in *us*. We deserve better; they deserve better.

Good intentions, however, are not always helpful. They can even be destructive, especially where they lack wisdom (*paññā*) and moral courage (*vesarajja*). As such, out of respect for the Dharma, we

³⁷ The Japanese monks were esp powerful, feared even by the shoguns, in the Nara period (710-784). The arresting of Buddhist monastic powers started in the Tokugawa period (1600-1867) and was complete by the Meiji era (1868-1912). “The decriminalization of *nikujiki saitai* was part of a complex of actions undertaken by the Meiji authorities in an effort to eliminate Edo period status distinction and to facilitate the ability of the state to track all subjects through the household registration” (Jaffe 2001:94). This removed the lay/monastic distinction, and effectively laicized the Buddhist order. See Piya Tan, **History of Buddhism**, ch 5 “The spread of Buddhism: Buddhism in Japan,” §§9-13 (Nara period), 12 (Tokugawa period), 23 (Meiji restoration).

³⁸ For a more detailed study of the fate of Buddhism in Japan, see **Monastics, sex and marriage**, SD 38.9.

³⁹ See eg (**Ahita**) **Thera S** (A 5.88/3:114-116), SD 40a.16. See also Jeffrey Samuels, “The Bodhisattva ideal in Theravāda Buddhist theory and practice: A reevaluation of the Bodhisattva-Śrāvaka opposition,” 1997.

need to know the Dharma well enough before we think of “spreading” it. We seriously need to spend some effective time in grounding and grooming ourselves in Dharma theory, especially the Suttas, to have some personal experience of meditation, to hold regular dialogues with experienced and compassionate Dharma teachers, and to compassionately work with others in the Dharma especially for the good of those who are out of it.

Sadly, so many of us Buddhist speakers and teachers today are Dharma-illiterate (even Dharma-challenged); but one thing must be said with some admiration: we really believe in what we say (unlike, say, the snake-oil peddlers of old).⁴⁰ Yet, as Dharma salesmen, we are generally unfriendly; we almost never befriend or talk with other Buddhist teachers; we rarely smile at each other. Often, we are even slavishly class-conscious, treating the more affluent or more influential better than those we deem as the lesser. Or worse, we are lacking in moral courage to discuss, far less resolve, difficult moral issues.

Above all, we should try our very best not to misrepresent the Buddha. If we have only “2-cent’s worth” of say, let us patiently save them until we have really a healthy surplus to benefit others with. If we have not even known the right questions, how can we ever know the right answers?

1.3.2 Cultishness can be totally destructive. In a worst-case scenario, a cult is where we totally surrender our bodies and minds to the cult or cult-figure, but in no way do we gain any personal growth or spiritual liberation. We stop thinking, becoming merely the hollow voice of the cult. Our bodies are used at the whims of the cult, for the personal benefit or pleasure of the cult-leader, or merely as tools for promoting the cult, resulting in unnecessary, even inhumane, harm or deprivation upon ourselves. In short, we have handed our remote control to the cult.

Cults are especially attractive to those who have identity problems (with a pathological need for identifying with someone or a group) or someone with a low self-esteem (who often needs the approval of a parent-figure). Such cults often use their members to raise and accumulates sizeable wealth. In fact, often the cult members would only be left with a bare minimum, or would willing surrender much, if not all of their wealth, for the “greater good” of the cult.

Most cult members, as such, are often physically, emotionally and financially dependent on the cult. Such followers, having denounced their families, renounced their friends and cast aside mainstream society, live in a very private limited reality of the cult. Many of them become so dependent on the cult that if the cult should be destroyed, they are effectively devastated themselves; it is not uncommon that they die along with the cult.⁴¹

2 Buddhist brainwashing and mind-control

2.1 BUDDHIST “BRAINWASHING” METHODS. If we take “brainwashing” as *a systematic way of eliminating established ideas from our minds so that a new set of ideas take their place* [1.1.2], then all organized religions make use of brainwashing. In fact, in religious language, this is called “conversion,” more of which later.

In an anti-cult situation, such as when an ex-cult member is rehabilitated into the family and the open society, this process is known as “**deprogramming**.” This refers to efforts at inducing a person to give up

⁴⁰ There are of course a growing number of degreed monastics and lay people in Malaysia and Singapore, but they tend to orbit in their own circles and are difficult to approach when we badly need clarification on Dharma matters. There is also a tendency, I suspect, to see paper qualifications in Buddhist Studies as an employment pass and status licence in an increasingly competitive religious economics. Local Buddhist diploma and degree courses run by Sinhalese missions here still have very much to be desired (attendance is poor and the standards very low), but surely these are the problems of pioneers.

⁴¹ A most notorious example would be Jim Jones’s Peoples Temple in Jonestown, Guyana. Jones claimed to be the reincarnation of Jesus of Nazareth, Mahatma Gandhi, Buddha, Vladimir Lenin, and Father Divine. On 18 Nov 1978, after an aborted investigation by the US Congress, Jones, to avoid prosecution, ordered his whole cult to “commit revolutionary suicide protesting the conditions of an inhumane world.” A total of 909 inhabitants of Jonestown, 276 of them children, died of apparent cyanide poisoning. This was the greatest single loss of American civilian lives in a non-natural disaster (overshadowed only by the 11 Sep 2001 World Trade Center, NY, bombing), and one of the largest mass suicides in history.

his allegiance to a religious, political, economic, or social group. Methods and practices often involve violent kidnapping and coercion.⁴² Deprogramming is often commissioned by relatives, usually parents, of the cult follower, who is taken against his or her will. Understandably, such forcible actions have led to controversies over freedom of religion and civil rights.

During the 1970s and 1980s, deprogramming was the main, even only available, technique used in the US to rehabilitate members of a sect or cult. In later years, however, other types of interventions, such as “**exit counseling**,” were used. This method is less traumatic for the sect follower as it does not use any coercion.⁴³ The general conviction of the exit-counselor is that once the cult member is aware of the logical flaws in his beliefs and allegiance, and understands the emotional factors binding him to the cult, he will be able to give it up.

Here, we can say that early Buddhism is a good example of an exit counselling system. However, it is a *self-initiated and self-propelled exit counselling process*. Buddhism has numerous teachings on how the mind works, and methods on how we can get out of the rut of wrong views. While both deprogramming and exit counselling are processes where the subject is induced to shift from undesirable views to more wholesome ones, the Buddhist exit counselling training essentially operates on two levels: firstly, the displacement of negative views by positive ones, and finally, the giving up of all views altogether. This latter stage is the ideal, found only in the arhat. [2.2.2]

2.2 BUDDHIST POSITIVE “MIND-CONTROL” METHODS

2.2.0 The three trainings. In contemporary terms, the early Buddhist training may be said to be a system of *exit counselling*, par excellence [2.1]. The most basic of such trainings is that of the threefold training or three trainings (*ti sikkhā*), of moral virtue, mental cultivation and insight wisdom.⁴⁴ In important ways, this is an *anti-cult training*, because it is basically a self-grooming in internalizing social, psychological and emotional skills.

2.2.1 Moral training (*sīla sikkhā*) or self-grooming in moral virtue is learning to restrain our acts and speech. This entails applying wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*) to our actions. Wise attention is the scrutinizing of our actions—whether bodily, verbal or mental—getting down to the root of the matter. Is this action rooted in greed, in hate, in delusion, or in fear? If so, why? What are the underlying tendencies spurring such an action?⁴⁵

This is not an intellectual investigation, but a *spiritual examination of conscience*. We begin the problem-resolution process by simply asking ourselves such basic questions. Then in the silence of our minds, the answer will emerge: we will then have a better idea of what our real motivations are and, as such, be in a better position to deal with them.

2.2.2 Mental cultivation: Freeing the mind from the unwholesome roots

2.2.2.1 GREED AND LUST. **Meditation training** (*samādhi sikkhā*) is the Buddhist training in “mind-control” [1.1.3], which founded on moral training, allows a deeper level of self-grooming, where we work directly on the motivational roots of our actions, be it greed, hate, delusion or fear. It is best to begin our meditation practice under a compassionate and experienced teacher, before we do it on our own. Even a wide reading on meditation—like reading all the books available on driving a car—is simply unlike actually learning to meditate (or drive) with a proper coach.⁴⁶

For thoughts connected with **greed and lust**, especially desire for *living beings*, the reflection of the body’s foulness or its 32 parts⁴⁷ should be done; when the desire is towards *inanimate objects*, one should

⁴² See Ted Patrick & Tom Dulack, *Let Our Children Go!* Boston: E P Dutton, 1976. See also: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deprogramming>.

⁴³ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exit_counseling.

⁴⁴ For details, see *Sīla samādhi paññā*, SD 21.6.

⁴⁵ On underlying habits or latent tendencies, see *Anusaya*, SD 31.3.

⁴⁶ See *Bhāvanā*, SD 15.1.

⁴⁷ “Foulness (of the body),” *asubha bhāvana* (cultivation of foulness) (M 62.22/1:425), is also called *asubha, -saññā* (perception of foulness) (eg A 60.6/5:109); or *asubha, nimitta* (sign of the foul) at **Āhāra S** (S 46.51.15/5:105, SD 7.15), which Comy says is one or other of the 10 foul objects, ie a corpse in one of the 10 stages of decomposi-

reflect on the ownerlessness or on the impermanence of things. Meditating on the true nature of the body is traditionally taught as beginning with the “earth element” in our own body (“head-hair, body-hair, nails, teeth, skin”). First, we notice their location and physical characteristics, and then note how they are impermanent, changing, our having no real control over them, and their propensity to become soiled, even rot away.⁴⁸ Such meditations should always end with some lovingkindness towards ourselves. We need to accept ourselves just as we are, to be forgiving to ourselves, before any self-healing can really start.⁴⁹

When we are physically or sexually attracted to a cult leader or our teacher, it is possible that that person reminds us of a past happy relationship we have had and find desirable. We should then remind ourselves that the person in our past (such as a parent or a partner) and the cult leader are different realities. What we see as desirable are *qualities*, not a person. If they are wholesome qualities (charity, lovingkindness, etc), then we should cultivate them within ourselves and direct them not just to the leader, but also to others we associate with.

2.2.2.2 LOVINGKINDNESS FOR SELF-HEALING. An essential characteristic of sexuality is that it is acquisitive: we *want* to feel loved, or we have a strong *urge* to give love to another. There is an inordinate emphasis on the “want” and the “urge” instead of the “feel” and the “love.” In other words, we can never get enough of sex as if we see it merely as an urge or want. The focus must be shifted away from what we do *not* have to what we *are* capable of in wholesome terms.

Mental health and healing begin with *unconditional self-acceptance*:

“I accept myself just as I am; I forgive myself unconditionally. Just as I accept and forgive myself, I accept and forgive others unconditionally, too.”

Although the social implications of this exercise can be complicated (should I forgive a mass murderer, for example), they only arise when we rationalize things. This exercise is not to desensitize ourselves to the wrongs and pains that are very real out there, but it addresses our emotional hurt and skew which we need to resolve so that we do not become emotionally dependent on others, or shut everyone else out of our lives.

2.2.2.3 HATE AND AVERSION are best resolved through the cultivation of lovingkindness, which (as already mentioned) is an unconditional acceptance of self and others, at least on the level of our inner being, where it should begin.⁵⁰ For thoughts connected with *hate* for living beings, we should cultivate lovingkindness, compassion, equanimity, and the ownership of karma (**Āghāta Paṭivīnaya Sutta 1**, A 5.161);⁵¹ or, we could reflect on the parable of the saw (**Kakacūpama Sutta**, M 21).⁵² For hatred towards inanimate things, the analysis of the elements (*dhātu, vavattāna*) should be applied.⁵³

tion (Vism 6.1-11/178 f). However, in the Suttas (eg **Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna S**, D 22.5/2:293 = SD 13; **Ānāpāna, sati S**, M 10.10/1:57 = SD 13 = SD 7.13; **Giri-m-ānanda S**, A 10.60/5:109 = SD 15.15), *asubha, saññā* (perception of foulness) or simply *asubha* (the foul or *asuci* (the impurities) refers to the observing of the 31 parts of the body, of which the Comys list 32 parts, adding “brain (in the head)” (Kh 3, Pm 1:6 f, Vism 8.42-144/236-266 & KhA 60), calling them *kāya, gata sati* (mindfulness of the body). The 31 parts of the body are also listed at **Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja S** (S 35.127.6/4:110-113). A slightly different list on the body meditation is given in **Vijaya S** (also called *Kāya, vicchandānika S*) (Sn 193-206/no 11) where it is said, “And the hollow of its [the body’s] head | Is filled with the brain” (Sn 199). Here in **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 62), *asubha bhāvanā* may either refer to the stages of bodily decomposition (or the charnel ground meditations), or to the meditation on the 31 parts of the body, some of which have earlier on been defined in terms of the 4 elements (M 62.8-11/1:421-423). From canonical usage, it is more likely to refer to the latter.

⁴⁸ On sensual lust, see **Anusaya**, SD 31.3 (2); **Kāma-c, chanda**, SD 32.2, esp (5).

⁴⁹ On meditation, see **Bhāvanā**, SD 15.1.

⁵⁰ On hatred and aversion, see **Anusaya**, SD 31.3 (3).

⁵¹ A 5.161/3:203 = SD 12.23.

⁵² M 21.20/1:129 = SD 38.1.

⁵³ Vism 348 says that the 4 primary elements are explained at length in **Mahā Hatthi, padōpama S** (M 28.6-27/-1:185-191 = SD 6.16), **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 62.8-17/1:421-426 = SD 3.11) and **Dhātu, vibhaṅga S** (M 140.13-18/3:240-242 = SD 4.17). The 4 elements are explained in some detail in **Mūla, pariyāya S** (M 1). The 6 elements (4

It is useful to remember here that these meditation methods are *healing exercises* with which we resolve our negative emotions, such as being caught up in self-hate or playing a “victim” role (persistently looking out for faults and mistakes in others, so that we trust no one, and is unable to healthily relate to others).⁵⁴ In other words, we end up personalizing the hurt instead of healing ourselves.

2.2.2.4 COGNITIVE DELUSION. For overcoming thoughts connected with delusion (*moha, dhātu pahīyati*), the Majjhima Commentary recommends that we should cultivate the five “Dharma supports” (*dhammūpanissaya*), that is:

- (1) mentorship under an experienced teacher (*garu, samvāsa*);
- (2) being intent on learning the Dharma (*uddesa*);
- (3) being intent on inquiring into the meaning of doctrines learnt (*uddiṭṭha, paripucchana*);
- (4) listening to the Dharma at proper times (*kālena dhamma-s, savana*); and
- (5) inquiring into what are and are not the causes (*thānāṭṭhāna, vinicchaya*). (MA 2:89)

Delusion is a distorted way of experiencing things, which can be *cognitive* (taking one thing for another), or *experiential* (taking what is false to be real). Cognitive delusion, that is, errors in judging our sense-experiences, can be reduced, even overcome, by cultivating *mindfulness*, that is, regularly watching the present moment, of being wisely engaged with what we are doing, saying or thinking.

This entails living a less cluttered life by setting our priorities right: we need to let go of, or at least cut down on, activities that are not helpful in our personal development and happiness. Essentially, this means that when our action is a negative one, we at once know and accept it to be so, so that we can hold it back, or reduce its impact, or make amends as is proper. Then, at the right time, we should *review* where and why we went wrong. [2.3.1.1]

A good exercise to cultivate and enhance present-moment awareness and effective self-review is some basic *breath meditation*: spend a few minutes a day during a quiet moment (or whenever necessary) focussed on noting how we breathe: we *know* that the breath is coming in, we *know* that the breath is going out.⁵⁵ In due course, we would greatly benefit by improving and mastering such a meditation.⁵⁶

2.2.2.5 EXISTENTIAL DELUSION. Existential delusion is more difficult to deal with, as it is more deeply rooted in our unconscious⁵⁷ than cognitive delusion is. This kind of delusion is that of seeing only *the surfaces* of people and things, totally oblivious of the rumblings or rottenness underneath. We act as if we are very limited editions of a walking pile of meat and bones,

seeing	what we want to see,
hearing	what we want to hear,
sensing	what we want to sense, and
knowing	what we want to know.

This is in fact *the way of a cult*: it only wants us to see what it wants us to see, it only wants us to hear what it wants us to hear, it only wants us to sense what it wants us to sense, it only wants us to know what it wants us to know.

Cults are especially unhelpful where there is mostly “surface” display. When we are dazzled by how the guru looks or dresses, then we are blind to his weaknesses. When we are unthinkingly caught up in routines and rituals, we lose touch with the true reality around and inside us. When we are caught up with

primary elements + space + consciousness) are mentioned in **Saṅgīti S** (D 33.2.1 (16)/3: 248), **Bahu, dhātuka S** (M 115.5/3:62), and **Tiṭṭh’āyatana S** (A 3.61.6/1:175 f = SD 6.8 n here); see also Dhs 638. On how the 4 primary elements cannot exist in themselves, see Boisvert 1995:36 f. Practical meditation instructions on the elements can be found in Vimm:ESK 1961:197-205, Vism 351, Pa Auk 1996:17; Fryba 1987:123. For the first 5 elements in later Buddhism, see Lama Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, London, 1959:183 ff. See **Khandha 1 Rūpa**, SD 17.2.

⁵⁴ See Dh 3 f. See also **Self & Selves**, SD 26.9 (4.1) & **Vyāpāda**, SD 32.5 (5).

⁵⁵ For more details, see **Āṇāpāna, sati S** (M 118), SD 7.13 esp (7).

⁵⁶ See **Bhāvanā**, SD 15.1 esp (1.5).

⁵⁷ See **The unconscious**, SD 17.8b.

the wealth and success of the cult, we become callous to the sufferings of those who really worked for them, or who are deprived of even the basic supports of life.⁵⁸

Cult leaders are experts at projecting appearances and surfaces to play on our *perception*, so that we see them as being more than what they really are. Such perceptions go on to shape and control the way we *think*. Our thoughts then become habituated and internalized as our own *views*. But these are perverse perceptions, perverse thoughts, perverse views. They should be recognized so and at once be uprooted from our minds.

2.2.2.6 FEAR. Cults thrive on fear, as it uses our fear of losing the affection and approval from others (especially the cult leader). Fear and craving, as such, are intimately related: one fuels the other. Both fear and craving are rooted in *ignorance*. We fear what we do not know; to be *ignorant* is to keep looking for refuge and answers outside of ourselves.⁵⁹

When we look for answers outside of ourselves, we project a deep sense of *lack* inside us. So we measure ourselves against others whom we view as being “better” or “more” than we are. We can never be happy this way because we do not know the true nature of these objects of envy or admiration. More often than not, such people who appear admirable outwardly are really hollow inside. Or worse, such people keep changing in their goals, tastes and status, and we can hardly keep up with them, as we are only trying to imitate our own projected images onto others. So we continue to be fed by the fear that we need to keep up with others.

This kind of fear arises from self-doubt or the inability to see what is wholesome in our own selves. When this occurs on a regular basis, it becomes spiritual doubt. This happens when we do not use our minds wisely, or more specifically, this is “unwise attention” (*ayoniso manasikāra*).⁶⁰ According to **the Vibhaṅga**, “unwise attention” is the taking of what is impermanent to be permanent, what is painful to be pleasurable, what is not self to be a self, and what is foul to be beautiful.⁶¹

The point is that everyone, even those cult gurus whom we admire or worship, are *impermanent*, they will change, and die. They suffer *pain*, too: that is why they, too, get upset, seek pleasures, and need our attention. They have no self or essence, they are really nobody, but we *made* them or *see* them as somebody. The cult gurus are themselves *impure*: their bodies smell like anyone else’s, they have to go to the toilet, and wash, like everyone else. And if we carefully examine their actions, we can also see that their minds are impure, too. Often, in moral terms, we are way ahead of the cult guru. [2.3]

A key that opens the cult prison door is **doubt**, that is, to question about the truth and reality of who the cult guru really is, what the cult teaches, of what is going on in the cult. Usually, it is neither helpful nor safe to openly question a cult. We might get clever or tailored responses that would actually help us suspend our judgements of the cult, or worse, we might get ourselves into some serious trouble with it. As such, the best approach is to learn from our doubts through wise observation of the cult, and at the right time, simply get off the boat before it sinks or we get thrown into the troubled waters. Once on safe ground, we are in a better position to warn others, even save them, from the cults.⁶²

2.3 INSIGHT WISDOM (paññā). If doubt is the “key” that opens the cult prison door, then that open door is wisdom; for, it frees us from the cult. Let us first examine the closed cult prison door. Why is it closed to us, keeping us locked in with the cult?

As already mentioned, the cult plays on our *perceptions*, so that we see them as being more than what they really are. Such perceptions go on to shape and control the way we *think*. Our thoughts then become habituated and internalized as our *views*. But these are perverse perceptions, perverse thoughts, perverse views. These three levels of perversion are mentioned in **the Vipallāsa Sutta** (A 4.49).

⁵⁸ On delusion, see *Anusaya*, SD 31.3 (5).

⁵⁹ On fear, see **Bhaya Bherava S** (M 4/1:16-24), SD 44.2; *Anusaya*, SD 31.3 (6).

⁶⁰ See *Vicikicchā*, SD 32.6 (2.2).

⁶¹ Vbh 936/373; MA 1:64.

⁶² For a basic list of current cultish “Buddhist” gurus and groups, see Rudy Harderwijk’s website: <http://viewonbuddhism.org/controversy-controversial-teacher-group-center-questionable.html>

We are drawn to a cult, firstly, on account of our *perversion of perception* (*saññā, vipallāsa*): we perceive ourselves as having a problem or a lack, and we look outside for answer and security. When we go on thinking like this, we are caught up with *the perversion of thought* (*citta, vipallāsa*), which sustains, or adds to our distorted perceptions. In due course, we become desperately sure that we have a problem and that the answer lies in the cult or cult-figure: this is *the perversion of view* (*diṭṭhi, vipallāsa*), which transforms the thought into a definitive thesis.⁶³

There is a well known ancient Indian analogy to illustrate all this: a man perceives a coiled up piece of rope in the dark as a snake (= perversion of perception); he assumes that what he has seen is a snake (= perversion of thought); he fabricates the view that the coiled up object he saw in the dark was a snake (= perversion of view).⁶⁴

Each level of perversion, in turn, see things in four wrongs ways—the four modes of perversion—or, psychological inversion,⁶⁵ that is,

what is impermanent	is taken to be permanent;	
what is painful	is taken to be pleasurable;	
what is not self	is taken to be a (or the) self; and	
what is impure	is taken to be pure.	(MA 1:64)

Insight wisdom begins with seeing what is impermanent as being truly impermanent; understanding what is painful as being really painful; experiencing what is not self as being truly not self; and knowing what is impure as being really impure. In due course, we will directly see true reality and be spiritually liberated.

3 Was early Buddhism a cult?

We started this study on cult Buddhism by examining the nature of a cult, some examples of Buddhist cults, and how to prevent ourselves from falling into their trap, and a bit on how to heal ourselves if we have been exploited by a cult. We will now examine a few historical questions regarding the Buddha and his teachings in terms of a cult.

3.1 THE BUDDHA PLACES THE DHARMA ABOVE HIMSELF. The Buddha, while he lives, is the first and final authority of the Sangha. Moreover, the Dharma is said to be against the current (*paṭisota, gāmī*)⁶⁶ of the world. By our definition [1.1.1.1], we could say that early Buddhism is a cult. However, it is a *good* cult [1.2], as the Buddha teaches us to understand the three unwholesome roots (greed, hate, and delusion),⁶⁷ to avoid them as much as possible, and in due course uproot them.

The Buddha clearly does not see himself as a cult leader, nor would he endorse one. Two important statements by the Buddha unequivocally support this. **The Gārava Sutta** (S 6.2) records how almost immediately after the Great Awakening, the Buddha declares that it is the Dharma that he himself respects.⁶⁸ And in his last days, as recorded in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), the Buddha declares that we should take ourselves as “refuge” (as the source of mindfulness and awakening), and should seek no external refuge.⁶⁹ [5.2]

⁶³ A 4.49/2:52 + SD 16.11 Intro.

⁶⁴ See *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, 1999:292 n34. The analogy appears in **Candrakīrti** (600-c650), in *Catuḥśataka Tīkā*, his Commentary on Aryadeva’s “Treatise of Four Hundred Stanzas” (Catuḥśataka, 3rd cent).

⁶⁵ See **Vipallāsa S** (A 4.49/2:52; Vism 22.68/685), SD 16.11; **Satipaṭṭhāna Ss**, SD 13.1 (4.1a). See Jack Engler, “Therapeutic aims in psychotherapy and meditation,” 1984: 44. Download from <http://www.hakomiinstitute.com/Forum/Issue9/TransformationCn.pdf>.

⁶⁶ A 4.5/2:5; Pug 4.27/8.

⁶⁷ See **The Three Roots Inc**, SD 31.12.

⁶⁸ S 6.2/1:138-140 = SD 12.3.

⁶⁹ **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16.2.26/2:100), SD 9; also at S 3:42 f, 5:163, 164 (at different venues).

Although the Buddha declares that the “world” is false, he is making a spiritual statement attested by our personal experiences. We make “sense” of the world through our physical sense-faculties, projected by the mind, so that we create our own private realities, notwithstanding the reality of the external world.

Furthermore, the Buddha does not deny the possibility of goodness and happiness here and now. Numerous teachings are given to lay followers on how to enjoy the best of both this world and spirituality.⁷⁰ The Sangha or “spiritual community” is never pitched as being the only “true community” as against the world, but that such a spiritual community provides the ideal conditions to expedite awakening from the sleep of ignorance, that is, for cultivating true wisdom. Whether one is a lay person or a monastic, the opportunity for spiritual awakening in this life is the same for all, and is simply a matter of personal choice and effort.⁷¹

3.2 THE BUDDHA’S SANGHA WAS NOT POLITICALLY STRUCTURED. Throughout the Buddha’s life and teaching, as we can cull from the Suttas, there is no record of the Buddha ever presenting himself as a “political” head of the sangha. If the Buddha were such a sangha leader, it would be well-structured like the Thai sangha with a Sangharaja, or any of the smaller *nikāyas* or sects of Sri Lanka or of Myanmar, each with its own mahā,nāyaka or “chief high priest,” or head. This is very clear from such discourses as **the Gopaka Moggallāna Sutta** (M 108).

The Sutta records how, a few months after the Buddha’s passing, Vassa,kāra, chief minister of Magadha, asks Ānanda whether the sangha has a successor to the Buddha. Ānanda answers no and adds that “the Dharma is our refuge.” The perplexed politically minded Vassa,kāra questions further, and Ānanda explains that the Buddha has prescribed the course of training (*sikkhā*) and the Pātimokkha (monastic code), which governs the lives of the monastics.

When Vassa,kāra is still perplexed how a community such as the sangha could thrive without the leadership of a single person, Ānanda goes on to explain how the sangha does show special regard for an elder monk with such qualities as moral virtue and wisdom. In other words, the sangha is guided not by the external power of an individual, but by their common moral virtue and spirituality.⁷²

3.3 THE BUDDHA DOES NOT ALWAYS CONVERT HIS AUDIENCE. If we accept the early Sutta accounts as true, we will often see the Buddha having to deal with monks and nuns who are undisciplined and who go against his teachings. Often with great patience, compassion and wisdom, he would admonish them, even when the benefits of such actions are not immediately evident. See the following discourses for examples of such occasions:

- Vinaya (Mahāvagga 1.6.7-9) The naked ascetic Upaka is not impressed by the Buddha.⁷³
- Udumbarikā Sīha,nāda Sutta (D 25) The Buddha fails to convert Nigrodha and the wanderers.
- Alagaddūpama Sutta (M 22) The monk Ariṭṭha views sexuality as allowable.
- Cūḷa Saccaka Sutta (M 35) The Buddha fails to convert the debater Saccaka.⁷⁴
- Mahā Saccaka Sutta (M 36) Further teachings to Saccaka, but still he is not converted.
- Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhāya Sutta (M 38) The monk Sāti views consciousness as a fixed reality.
- Kosambiya Sutta (M 48) During a quarrel, the Kosambī monks tells the Buddha off.
- Bāhitika Sutta (M 88) King Pasenadi questions Ānanda about the Buddha’s integrity.
- Meghiya Sutta (A 9.3 = U 4.1) Meghiya, the Buddha’s attendant, disobeys him.

Such discourses record how the Buddha patiently, compassionately and wisely deals with various individuals and groups who have strayed. Although he is not always successful, he nevertheless teaches the Dharma to them. Once the seeds are planted, it is a matter of time that they will grow.

⁷⁰ The best known at **Sigāl’ovāda S** (D 31/3:189-193 = SD 4.1) on social ethics and the lay follower’s welfare, **Digha,jānu S** (A 8.54/4:280 = SD 5.10) on worldly and spiritual happiness, and **Ādiya S** (A 5.41/3:44 = SD 2.1) on how to truly enjoy your wealth.

⁷¹ See eg the 10 suttas of S 25/3:225-228, on the ease of gaining awakening in this life itself.

⁷² M 108/3:7-15 = SD 33.5.

⁷³ V 1:8; M 1:171; J 1:81; DhA 4:71 f; cf Miln 235; UA 54; Kvu 289; Mvst 3:326.

⁷⁴ Contra DPPN (sv Saccaka), where he is said to “became his [the Buddha’s] follower.”

In the **Saḷāyatana Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 137), the Buddha explains that he teaches out of compassion, and no matter how his audiences respond, whether favourably or not, he *feels* for them, but is *untroubled* by them. The Buddha admonishes us to be like him, that is, cultivate the three “foundations of mindfulness” (*ti satipaṭṭhāna*), thus:

- The Buddha teaches out of compassion, but *none* of his disciples listen to him, and they deviate from his teachings: he is not pleased with this, but is fully mindful, untroubled by it.
- The Buddha teaches out of compassion, and *some* of his disciples do listen to him, and they do not deviate from his teachings: he is pleased with this, but is fully mindful, untroubled by it (not overcome with desire).
- The Buddha teaches out of compassion, and his disciples *do* listen to him, and they do *not* deviate from his teachings: he is pleased with this, but is fully mindful, untroubled by it.

(M 137.22-24/2:221 f), SD 29.5

A similar teaching, in greater detail, is given in **the Mahā Suññata Sutta** (M 122), where the Buddha states that the relationship between teacher and pupil should be one of *spiritual friendship*, which can be a “fiery friendship,” where weaknesses and errors are pointed out and corrected:

Ānanda, I shall not treat you as a potter treats raw damp clay.⁷⁵ Restraining you again and again,⁷⁶ I will admonish you, cleansing you again and again.⁷⁷ The core will remain standing.⁷⁸

(M 122.27/3:118), SD 11.4

The potter, in the parable, is said to hold the damp clay-pot he has made and wishes, “Please do not break,” but when the fired pots are found to have cracks or are deficient, he destroys or casts away them away. A spiritual friend, on the other hand, while aware of his mentee’s faults, instead of praying or making wishes, works together with the mentee to rise above such limitations, even if he needs to be reprimanded in the process. In other words, a spiritual friend does not give up on his mentee.

On the mentee’s part, if he were to find a teacher or spiritual friend who is able to admonish him on how to gain inner peace, higher wisdom and spiritual liberation, he should “regard the teacher as being

⁷⁵ “As a potter treats raw, damp clay, *yathā kumbha, kāro āmake āmaka, matte*. Comy glosses *āmake* as *apakkhe*, and *āmaka, matte ti āmake nātisukkhe bhājane*, “an unbaked vessel, not quite dry. The potter gently takes these vessels in both hands, saying, “Do not break,” but I will not proceed with you as the potter does.” (MA 4:166). I B Horner notes: “I do not see the full force of this simile... But I believe it means that whereas the potter gives, and can give, his vessels one chance only, the Teacher is undefeated by any initial failure there may be, and proceeds undeterred with the expectation of final success on the part of his pupil” (M:H 3:162 n1).

⁷⁶ “Restraining you again and again,” *niggayha niggayha*. Comy: “Having exhorted once, I will not be silent. Constantly reproving (*niggahetvā niggahetvā*) again and again, I will exhort, I will instruct” (MA 4:166). Cf *niggayha, vādī* (Dh 76), qu at DhA 2:108.

⁷⁷ “Cleansing you again and again,” *pavayha pavayha* (M 1:442, 444, 3:18 = DhA 2:108), ger of *pavāhati*, “(1) to cause to be carried away, to remove; freq with ref to water: to wash away cleanse (M 1:39; S 1:79, 183, 2:88; Tha 751). (2) to pull out, draw out (D 1:77, better read as *pabāhati*)” (PED abridged). Comy explains that the Buddha removes one’s faults (*dosa*), “as a potter, having removed (*pavāhetvā*, vl *pajahitvā*) the cracked and broken vessels [Se *bhinna, chinna, bhājanāni*] from among those that have been baked, takes the well baked ones, tapping (ie testing) them again and again. So too I having repeatedly removed (faults from you), will again and again exhort and instruct you.” (MA 4:166).

⁷⁸ *Yo sāro so ṭhassati*. Comy: “While being exhorted thus by me, those who have reached the pith (*sāra*) of the ways and the paths will persist. The mundane virtues [aforementioned teachings] are also intended as a criterion of spiritual essence.” (MA 4:167). *Sāra* means: (1) the heartwood or pith of a tree; (2) essence (essential truth). I B Horner: “It is no doubt meant that this will persist and endure (like well baked vessels) when all the mistakes and errors that dog as learner’s path have been cleared away and removed (like the cracked and broken vessels from among those that have been well baked)” (M:H 3:162 n4). In **Gandhāra J** (J 406), the potter imagery is again used to show the Buddha’s role as a teacher. Skilling 1997:393 n97 points to a recurrence of this same imagery in the **Saṅgha, bheda, vastu** (Gnoli 1978a:78,19) is used in the same way.

worthy of his devotion even if he is told to leave.”⁷⁹ For, such a teacher does not see a disciple as a mere statistic in a group, but as an individual whose special needs must be addressed so that he grows spiritually.⁸⁰

3.3 THE BUDDHA INVITES US TO EXAMINE HIM. The Buddha, on account of his great compassion and wisdom, is “an unexcelled guide of persons to be tamed” (*anuttaro purisa, damma, sarathī*). Anyone who is willing and ready to walk the path can be taught to do so by the Buddha (or the Dharma).

Unlike the cultish ancient brahmins who kept their learning and wisdom secret, the Buddha does not have “a guru’s fist,” that is, he does not hold anything back from his disciples.⁸¹ Whatever needs to be learned, he has taught them; we only need to “come and see” (*ehi, passika*). And they come in great numbers to the Buddha’s teaching. In fact, so great was the Buddha’s success that many of the sectarian wanderers of his time are envious of it.

The Sundarī Sutta (U 4.8) records how some wanderers, jealous of the Buddha’s success plot to discredit him by charging that he is having an affair with the beautiful female wanderer, Sundarī. She is killed and her body buried in the grounds of Jeta, vana where the Buddha is residing. When the body is discovered, the wanderers at once accuse the Buddha of having her murdered to cover up his affair with her. Knowing that the truth will out in seven days, the Buddha maintains silence.⁸²

The Bāhītika Sutta (M 88) records, in a related account, how king Pasenadi does his own investigation (MA 3:346,18), and even questions Ānanda on the Buddha’s integrity, and asking Ānanda about how he defines moral behaviour. Pasenadi is recorded as being satisfied with Ānanda’s answer. When a few drunken plotters spilled the beans, Pasenadi’s spies seize them. They confess to the truth, and the real culprits are apprehended and made to publicly own up their dark deed. The Buddha’s fame grows even greater as a result (UA 261 f).

The teachings of the **Vimāṃsaka Sutta** (M 47) are even more clear about not taking the Buddha for granted. He advises others to examine his actions, words and thoughts, to see if they are free from greed, hate and delusion, or not. Only when we are sure (taking as much time as we need for investigating) that they are free from these three unwholesome roots, should we accept him as our teacher and follow his teaching.⁸³

The rationale for all this is clearly laid out by the Buddha towards the close of **the Udumbarikā Sīha, nāda Sutta** (D 25), where the Buddha declares

Let an intelligent person, honest, trustworthy, upright, come to me, and I will instruct him, I will teach him the Dharma. If he practises what he is taught, then, to attain for himself here and now that supreme goal of the holy life, for the sake of which sons of family go forth from the household life into the homeless state, will take him *seven years...or even seven days*.⁸⁴

Let whoever is your teacher remain as your teacher....

Let your rules remain as your rules....

Let your livelihood remain as your livelihood....

Let what you consider unwholesome continue to be so considered....

Let what you consider wholesome continue to be so considered....

—I do not speak for any of these reasons.

There are, Nigrodha, unwholesome things that have not been abandoned, defiled, conducive to rebirth, fearful, productive of painful results in the future, associated with birth, decay and death. It is for the abandonment of these things that I teach Dharma.

⁷⁹ M 122.20b/3:115 = SD 11.4.

⁸⁰ See **Spiritual friendship**, SD 34.1.

⁸¹ **Mahā, parinibbāna S** (D 16.2.25a/2:100), SD 9.

⁸² U 4.8/43-45.

⁸³ M 47/1:317-320 = SD 35.6.

⁸⁴ This section on the Buddha’s “prediction” of realization is also found in **Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna S** (D 22.22) and **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10.46), SD 13, & also Analayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna: The direct path to realization*, 2003:250-257 .

If you practise accordingly, these defiled states will be abandoned, the states that purify will increase, and by your direct knowledge, you will realize, here and now, the bountiful perfection of wisdom.⁸⁵ (D 25,22.2-23/3:55 f), SD 1.4

3.4 THE BUDDHA APPOINTS NO SUCCESSOR. Almost immediately after his awakening, says the **Gārava Sutta** (S 6.2), the Buddha declares that it is the Dharma that he himself respects⁸⁶ [3.1]. And in his last days, too, the Buddha declares that we should take ourselves as “refuge” (as the source of mindfulness and awakening), and seek no external refuge⁸⁷ [5.2].

The Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta (D 16) goes on to relate how the Buddha, at the age of 80, falls seriously ill with dysentery.⁸⁸ He resolves not to die until he has taken leave of his lay supporters and the monastic community. The Sutta continues to recount the Buddha’s final instructions on how the Buddhist community should not function in a person-centred way:

Only this much comfort have I, thinking: ‘The Blessed One will not pass into parinirvana until he has made some statement [pronouncement] concerning the order of monks.’”

“Ānanda, what does the order of monks expect of me? I have taught the Dharma, Ānanda, making no distinction between inner and outer:⁸⁹ **the Tathāgata has no guru’s fist**⁹⁰ in respect of teachings.

If there is anyone who thinks: ‘I shall take charge of the order,’⁹¹ or ‘The order should refer to me,’⁹² then let *him* make some statement about the order. But, Ānanda, it does not occur to the Tathāgata, to think, ‘I shall take charge of the order,’ or ‘The order should refer to *me*.’ So why should the Tathāgata make a statement about the order? (D 16.2.23-25/2:99 f), SD 9

The Vinaya Reciters even introduced a story of how the Buddha emphatically rejects Deva,datta’s proposal that he (Deva,datta) take over the aged Buddha’s role as “leader” of the sangha:

Devadatta, I would not hand over the order of monks even to Sāriputta and Moggallāna. How then could I hand it over to you, a wretched one, to be rejected like spittle? (V 2:188; quoted at DhA 1:139 f; cf. M 1:393)⁹³

This is probably a story interpolated to strongly affirm the Buddha’s admonition that the sangha be governed by a legal code (the Vinaya) and its spirit (the Dharma). Otherwise, it is curious that Devadatta, who is as old as the Buddha himself would have the audacity to think of taking over the sangha.⁹⁴

⁸⁵ On the significance of this whole passage in greater detail, see SD 19.1(7.3).

⁸⁶ S 6.2/1:138-140 = SD 12.3.

⁸⁷ **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16.2.26/2:100), SD 9; also at S 3:42 f, 5:163, 164 (at different venues).

⁸⁸ D 16.2.23/2:99 = SD 9.

⁸⁹ Comys: “Making no distinction between inner and outer,” *anantaram abāhiram karitvā*. Comys explain it as making no distinction of either inner or outer by way of the Dharma or by way of persons. Making an ‘inner’ of the Dharma means to teach, thinking, ‘This much Dharma I will not teach others.’ Making an ‘outer’ of the Dharma means to teach, thinking, ‘I will teach this much to others.’ Making an ‘inner’ of the person means to teach, thinking, ‘I will teach this person.’ Making an ‘outer’ of the person means to teach, thinking, ‘I will not teach this (person).’ Thus he teaches without making a distinction. This is the meaning.” (DA 2:547 = SA 3:203). On this twofold distinction, see Miln 1145 f, 159 f. See foll n.

⁹⁰ *N’atthi ācariya,muṭṭhi*. Comys: “The teacher’s fist is found amongst outsiders who do not tell certain things to their pupils when they are still boys (*dahara,kāle*), who keep certain teachings for their beloved and favourite pupils, telling it to them only at the last moment from their deathbed. The Tathāgata does not hold back anything, keeping a closed fist, thinking, ‘I will teach this in my old age, at the last moment.’” (DA 2:548 = SA 3:203 f)

⁹¹ *Aham bhikkhu,saṅgham pariharissāmī ti*. On how the Buddha addresses him, using *tathāgata* and *aham*, see **Cūḷa Māluṅkya,putta S** (M 63), SD 5.8 (3).

⁹² *Mam’uddesiko bhikkhu,saṅgho ti*.

⁹³ See Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, Singapore, 2004: ch 5 (20).

Even when the Buddha is still living, he does not consider himself as “leader” of the sangha, but only as someone who “cares of” or “looks after” the community in a spiritual way. And as, recorded in **the Cā-tumā Sutta** (M 67), it is not the Buddha alone who “looks after” (*parihissāmi*, “I will take care of”) the sangha, but it is also the task of capable monks like Sāriputta and Moggallāna who should do so (*parihareyyam*), too.⁹⁵

4 The supreme worship

One of the most inspiring accounts of the Buddha’s teaching on *the supremacy of the Dharma* is found in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16). It is said that as the Buddha lies between the twin sal trees in the Mallas’ sal grove in his last moments, the sal trees, though it is out of season, burst into fruit and flower, and showering their blossoms upon the Buddha. Mandarava flowers and sandalwood powder gently rain from the sky, and divine music is heard, by way of offerings to the Buddha (*tathāgatassa pūjāya*).

The Buddha then declares to Ānanda that such offerings are *not* the highest form of honour or veneration. The highest form of respect—the “supreme worship”—any monk, nun, layman or laywoman can show the Buddha (while he is living or after his passing) is to *live practising the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma*.⁹⁶

The Dīgha Commentary on this passage explains that the Bodhisattva did not make the resolution at the feet of Dīpaṅkara Buddha to become a Buddha for the sake of garlands, scents, music and songs. The Buddha rejects this kind of worship for the sake of the long life of the teaching (*sāsana*) and for the benefit of the assembly (the monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen). If the “**worship with material things**” (*āmisa,pūjā*)⁹⁷ were not rejected, then we, his followers would not cultivate moral virtue, mental concentration and insight, but instead would spend our lives worshipping and thinking in terms of material things.

Not even a thousand monasteries equal to the Mahā,vihāra, or a thousand caityas or shrines equal to the Mahā,ceṭiya,⁹⁸ it declares, are able to support the teaching. And so it concludes: “Now, for the Tathāgata, **right practice is proper worship**, and surely it has been laid down by him for supporting the teaching.”⁹⁹ In short, the supreme is the practice of the Dharma, and the attaining of awakening in this life itself.

5 Non-cult Buddhism

5.1 PATH OF PROGRESS. Now that we have a good idea of what cult Buddhism is, what about non-cult Buddhism, that is, the Buddha Dharma that can really free us from suffering. The short answer is that it is the kind of teaching that can bring us to attain streamwinning, that is, the first step on the noble path

⁹⁴ See **Devadatta**, SD 71.4.

⁹⁵ M 67.13/1:459 = SD 34.7.

⁹⁶ *Yo kho Ānanda bhikkhu vā bhikkhunī vā upasakā vā upāsikā vā dhammānudhamm,paṭipanno viharati samāci,paṭipanno anudhamma,cārī, so Tathāgataṃ sakkaroṭi garukaroṭi māneti pūjeti paramāya pūjāya.* (D 5.3/2:138). See D 16.5.2-3/3:137 + SD 9 Intro (7b).

⁹⁷ There are 2 kinds of worship (*pūjā*): worship (or honouring) with material things (*āmisa,pūjā*) and worship with practice (*paṭipatti,pūjā*) (D 2:138; A 1.93). Dīgha Comy replaces *paṭipatti,pūjā* with “worship with non-material things” (*nirāmisa,pūjā*) (DA 5:179): see next para.

⁹⁸ *Mahā,vihāra,sadisaṅ hi vihāra,sahassam mahā,ceṭiya,sadisaṅ ca ceṭiya,sahassam pi sāsanaṃ dhāretuṃ na sakkoti.* **The Mahāvihāra** was the central monastery in Anurādhapura built by Devanampiya Tissa (247-207 BCE) that came to be identified with orthodox Theravāda tradition in Sri Lanka. When Anurādhapura was abandoned around the 13th century, the history of Mahāvihāra came to an end. **The Mahāceṭiya** is presumably a reference to the Mahā Thūpa (Great Stupa) in Anurādhapura built by Duṭṭha,gāmaṇī after his victory over the Tamils and which is said to enshrine one-eighth of all Buddha’s relics.

⁹⁹ *Sammā,paṭipatti pana Tathāgatassa anucchavikā pūjā, sā hi tena paṭṭhitā c’eva sakkoti sāsanaṃ ca sandhāretuṃ* (DA 2:578). See **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16.5.2-3a/2:138) + SD 9 (7b).

to full awakening. This passage from **the Kūṭa,danta Sutta** (D 5) typically describes how the Buddha’s teaching leads to streamwinning:

Then the Blessed One gave the brahmin Kūṭa,danta a **progressive talk**—that is to say, he spoke on giving (*dāna*), spoke on moral virtue (*sīla*) and spoke on the heavens (*sagga*); and explained the danger, the vanity and the disadvantages of sensual pleasures (*kām’ādīnava*), and the advantages of renunciation (*nekkhamm’ānisaṃsa*).

When the Blessed One perceived that the brahmin Kūṭa,danta’s mind was prepared, pliant, free from obstacles, elevated and lucid, then he explained to him the teaching peculiar to the buddhas,¹⁰⁰ that is to say, suffering, its arising, its cessation, and the path.¹⁰¹

And just as a clean cloth, with all its stains removed, would take dye, even so did the brahmin Kūṭa,danta, even while seated there, there arose the dust-free stainless Dharma-eye [vision of truth],¹⁰² thus:

“All that is of the nature of arising is of the nature of ending.”
(*Yaṃ kiñci samudaya,dhammaṃ sabbantaṃ nirodha,dhamman ti*)

Then the brahmin Kūṭa,danta, who has seen the truth,¹⁰³ won the truth, knew the truth, plunged into the truth, crossed over doubt, abandoned uncertainty, one who, independent of others, has gained self-confidence in the Teacher’s Teaching,¹⁰⁴ said...

(D 5,29-30/1:148), SD 22.8

5.2 SATIPATTHANA. The Cunda Sutta (S 47.13/5:161-163) and **the Ukkacela Sutta** (S 47.14/5:164 f) record that following the deaths of Sāriputta and of Mahā Moggallāna, the Buddha exhorts the monks to “live as islands unto yourselves,” that is, alluding to the practice of *the four focusses of mindfulness* for the sake of the longevity of the Buddha’s Teaching.

Similarly, three early texts—**the Ṭhiti Sutta** (S 47.22/5:173), **the Parihāna Sutta** (S 47.23/5:173 f) and **the Suddhaka Sutta** (S 47.25/5:174)—attest to the vitality of satipatthana as the reason for the longevity of the Buddha’s teaching as enshrined in the Buddha’s last instructions, thus:

Therefore, Ānanda, you should live as islands unto yourselves,¹⁰⁵ being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge, with the Dharma as an island,¹⁰⁶ with the Dharma as your refuge, with no other refuge.

¹⁰⁰ *Buddhānaṃ sāmukkaṃsikaṃ desanā.*

¹⁰¹ This is stock: V 1:15; D 1:148; A 3:184 etc.

¹⁰² *Evam eva kūṭadantassa brāhmaṇassa tasmim̐ yeva āsane virajam̐ vīta,malam̐ dhamma,cakkhum̐ udapādi.*

Comy says that the “Dharma-eye” (*dhamma,cakkhu*) is the path of streamwinning: in **Brahmāyu S** (M 91.36/2:145), it refers to the 3 paths (*tiṇṇaṃ maggānaṃ*), ie culminating in non-return; in **Cūḷa Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 147.9/3:280), the destruction of cankers (*āsava-k,khaya*). The following sentence: “All that is subject to arising is subject to ending.” shows the mode in which the path arises. The path takes ending (nirvana) as its object, but its function is to penetrate all conditioned states as being subject to arising and ending. (MA 3:92)

¹⁰³ “The truth” (*dhamma*) here refers to the 4 noble truths. Having seen the truth for himself, he cuts off the fetter of doubt and now has “the noble and liberating view that accordingly leads the practitioner to the complete destruction of suffering” (*yā’yaṃ diṭṭhi ariyā niyyānikā niyyāti tak,karassa sammā,dukkha-k,khayāya*, **Kosambiya S**, M 48,-7/1:322)

¹⁰⁴ *Atha kho kūṭadanto brāhmaṇo diṭṭha,dhammo patta,dhammo vidita,dhammo pariyogālha,dhammo tiṇṇa,vicikiccho vigata,katham,katho vesāraja-p,patto apara-p,paccayo satthu,sāsane.* As at V 1:12 f (streamwinning of Koṇḍañña, Vappa & Bhaddiya), 15 f (streamwinning of Mahānāma & Assaji); **Ambaṭṭha S** (D 3.2.21-22/1:110); **Kūṭadanta S** (D 5.29/1:149); **Cūḷa Saccaka S** (M 35.24/1:234, 26/1:235); **Upāli S** (M 18/1:380); **Mahā Vaccha,-gotta S** (M 73.10/1:491); **Dīgha,nakha S** (M 74.15/1:501); **Brahmāyu S** (M 91.36/2:145); **Sīha S** (A 8.12.9/4:186); **Ugga S 1** (A 8.21/4:209); **Ugga S 2** (A 8.22/4:214); **Kuṭṭhi S** (U 5.3/49).

¹⁰⁵ “As islands unto yourselves,” Skt *ātma,dvīpa*; P *atta,dīpa*. See S:B 1921 n143.

And how does a monk live as an island unto himself...with no other refuge?
 Here, Ānanda, a monk,¹⁰⁷ having put away covetousness and displeasure for the world,¹⁰⁸
 contemplating the body in the body,
 contemplating feelings in feelings,
 contemplating the mind in the mind,
 contemplating mind-objects in mind-objects.

That, bhikshus, is how a monk lives as an island unto himself...with no other refuge.

And those who now in my time or afterwards live thus, they will become the highest,¹⁰⁹ but they must be anxious to learn. (D 16.2.26/2:100 f = 26.1/3:58, 26.27/77; S 3:42, 5:154, 163, 164)

The Buddha has given us the best weapon against the cults, that is, **meditation**. When we meditate on the true nature of our bodies, we see them for what they are: consciousness patched up with the four elements, a love-gift from our parents, sustained by food, but subject to the inclemencies of our surroundings, and is, above all, impermanent. With this understanding, we free our bodies from the touch of cults and gurus; for, our bodies are really seen for what they are in true light.

This body-based mindfulness frees our mind from our physical being, whence thoughts proliferate, forming and feeding our self-created worlds. Having given up this fabricated world of the physical senses, we venture into the realm of feelings, of directly knowing pleasure and joy for what they really are—and yes, they are truly beautiful, but impermanent all the same. Knowing this, no guru, no matter how clever or cunning, could seduce us away from our dawning self-realization.

As we begin to see how these precious feelings are mind-made, it becomes easier for us to let them go. It is like we have held a beautiful flower long enough in our hands to enjoy it. We let the flower go, and stand away to look at it from a distance, and see a sky of flowers. This is our mind that has brought us these joyful flowers in the first place.

As we dwell intimately with our minds, beyond pain and pleasure, beyond good and evil, in the stillness of inner space, we see what eyes can never see, nor ears hear, nor the nose smell, nor the tongue taste, nor body feel, nor the mind think. We are the very thing of beauty that poets and maestros try to sing about, that artists painfully try to print on canvas, that visionaries can only dream about. We *are* that beauty, we *are* that truth, so that we can really say *beauty is truth, truth beauty*.¹¹⁰

5.3 LOVINGKINDNESS. Cults can be very attractive when we have no real families, no true friends to turn to, lonely in an increasingly crowding and rushing world. A cult deludes us into believing that our life's questions have been answered, that we are in the presence of a living god or Buddha. A cult, in fact, is the most sinister and insidious of corporations, very well organized and centralized set-up, sliding on a belly of funds, but we are really only one of its tiny moving legs.

The magical antidote here is the cultivation of lovingkindness. We need to firstly accept ourselves just as we are, fully forgiving ourselves whatever commissions and omissions that we can remember: they are just memories, the dead that refuse to be buried. We need to leave them buried. Then we go on to

¹⁰⁶ “With Dharma as an island,” Skt *dharma, dvīpa*; P *dhamma, dīpa*. See **The one true refuge**, SD 3.1 (3.3).

¹⁰⁷ DA says that “monk” (*bhikkhu*) here indicates “whoever undertakes that practice...is here included under the term *bhikkhu*.” See Dh 142; also Dh 362, 260-270. Cf *Bhikkhu Vagga* (ch 25) and *Brāhmaṇa Vagga* (ch 26) of Dh.

¹⁰⁸ “World” (*loka*). **Vibhaṅga** says: “This very body is the world, and the five aggregates of clinging (ie form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness) are the world—this is called the world.” (Vbh 195). However, in his amplified tr at Vbh 105, U Thittila has “world (ie, in ideational objects)” (*dhammā*, mental objects) (Vbh:T 139).

¹⁰⁹ The highest,” *tama-t-agge* (“the highest”): Comy gives a long expl, the essence of which is “cutting off all yokes to darkness (ignorance)” (*sabbam tama, yogam chinditvā*, DA 548); also at S 47.9/5:154, where Comy takes it as *tama-agge*, with the infix *-t-* as euphonic junction (*pada, sandhi*): see S:B 1921 n143. Bodhi notes that this word is not found in the fragments of the Turfan Skt version, but the Tib and Chin parallels, probably based on Skt texts, point to a meaning as “the highest” (S:B 1921 n143). See *Last Days of the Buddha*. (D 16), tr (rev) Vajirā & Story, Wheel 67/68/69, Kandy: Buddhist Publ Soc, 1998: n20. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/canon/digha/dn16.html>

¹¹⁰ For a less poetic explanation of *satipaṭṭhāna*, see **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 20), SD 13.1 (5).

accept others just as they are: what we are doing is to free our images of hate, pain and mismeasurements of others. Just as we are happy, let others be happy, too.

We go on building up this lovingkindness, like the sun that always rises and shines brightly on everyone and everything. As our minds and bodies heal themselves, we begin to glow spiritually, inspiring lovingkindness in others, and we begin to make more and more true-hearted friends. For friends are not found, they are made, and the best way to make friends is through lovingkindness, opening the doors of our hearts to others.¹¹¹

5.4 SAFE ISLANDS. Some scholars or readers might see a dichotomy or polarity between cult Buddhism and mainstream Buddhism. Interesting as it may be to discuss the tension between the two,¹¹² it is not my aim to do so here. The purpose here is to encourage personal introspection on this troubling matter of cults in general and Buddhist cultism specifically. Both cult Buddhism and mainstream Buddhism have their own problems. As such, it is best to take the middle course, and to be islands unto ourselves, as it were.

If cults were pirate ships plying and plundering the world's seas and shores, then the Buddha Dharma is like a very safe fortified island where fugitives from stricken ships could live in true safety, freedom and happiness. But there is a deeper meaning why "island" (*dīpa*) is used here.

When we are unawakened, we are like isolated islands in the waters of suffering, that swirl and swell with the currents of lust, of existence, of ignorance, and of views. When these four floods have forever receded, the various islands become hills and valleys, parts of a single fertile continent. In the meantime, we must make every effort to keep away from the dangerous waters, or learn to swim and quickly get out of the currents so that we do not drown in them, but reach safe land.

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[See also SD 64.17 Bibliography]

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¹¹¹ For more on *mettā, bhāvanā*, see **Karaṇīya Metta S** (Khp 9 = Sn 1.8), SD 38.3.

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